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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SARAJEVO 001553

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - AGREEMENT ON CENSUS? DON'T COUNT ON IT

REF: SARAJEVO 1348

Classified By: DCM Judith Cefkin. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Underscoring growing political intransigence on key reforms, Bosnian leaders sharply diverge on the data to include in a country-wide census, which Bosnia has not conducted since 1991. The EU-Bosnia Partnership Agreement -- a non-binding document outlining reforms the EU deems necessary for Bosnia's further progress toward accession -- mandates accurate population statistics through a census. The EU is urging a Bosnian census in 2011, coterminous with the census in EU countries. Because the preparations can take several years, the EU is encouraging Bosnia to begin work in October 2008. But Bosniaks and Serbs have clashed over the inclusion in the census of data on religion, ethnicity, and language, which Serbs insist is essential because it would codify the "right" of Serbs to their ethnicity, and Bosniaks oppose because they contend it would legitimize the Serb-driven ethnic cleansing of the 1992-95 war. The Bosniaks have used the census stalemate as an opportunity to accuse the Serbs of continuously obstructing state-level initiatives, and the Serbs have used the dispute as one more excuse to argue that the Republika Srpska is committed to a "European path" and that Bosniak intransigence is holding it and the country back. END SUMMARY.

The Census Matters  
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¶2. (SBU) The Partnership Agreement, a non-binding document outlining reforms the EU deems necessary for Bosnia's further progress toward accession, mandates that Bosnia hold a country-wide census, primarily to collect regional economic data. The publication of accurate GDP per capita figures -- which can be derived only from a census -- is a requirement for all EU member states and a condition for membership. Bosnia held its last census in 1991, before the war, and uses the 1991 census data to determine representation in government structures, so the EU and HighRep Lajcak -- in his capacity as EU Special Representative -- are pushing for a new census. The EU is urging BiH to hold a census in 2011, as that date marks exactly 20 years from the last census and coincides with a scheduled census in EU member states. Because a census takes several years to prepare, the EU is encouraging Bosnia to begin work in October 2008.

Bosniaks, Failing Solution, Spout Invective  
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¶3. (SBU) The Bosniak parties have long opposed a census, fearing that it would legitimize ethnic cleansing and possibly threaten the codified strength of the Bosniak

majority in Bosnia. HighRep Lajcak at the August 23 discussion with the leaders of the six ruling parties in the state government proposed a census without data on ethnicity or religion, in hopes of striking a compromise (reftel). He noted -- as did the European Commission delegation chairman in Bosnia after the talks -- that such data are not necessary to meet EU requirements and that numerous EU countries do not include them in their censuses. The Bosniaks initially endorsed this idea, but their enthusiasm fizzled after the Serbs failed to acquiesce. Shortly thereafter, Party of Democratic Action (SDA) leader Sulejman Tihic reverted to his previous position that now is not the time for a census. He opined that while "the country is still disorganized, the returns process is not complete, and two-thirds of those who returned to the Republika Srpska (RS) have citizenship ID cards issued in the Federation so they can enjoy health insurance and veterans' allowance," a census is not viable.

14. (SBU) Instead of focusing on Lajcak's and the European Commission's statements that Bosnia can meet the EU census requirement without data on ethnicity, religion, and language, Bosniak leaders have used the census to take potshots at the Serbs. Bosniak Tri-Presidency member Haris Silajdzic told the daily Oslobođenje that "the RS has revealed its true motives: a census as a mechanism for legalizing their ethnic cleansing project." Party of Democratic Action (SDA) chairman Sulejman Tihic told the Mostar daily Dnevni List that RS PM Milorad Dodik "needs a census in which ethnic and religious identity are expressed so that he can say the RS is 95% Serb and is an ethnically pure territory, and use that later as an argument for RS

SARAJEVO 00001553 002 OF 002

secession from Bosnia."

Serbs Return Fire

15. (SBU) The Serbs -- eager to codify their "right" to their ethnicity -- insist on a census that includes data on ethnicity, religion, and language, and they have openly discussed the possibility of shepherding the census within the RS themselves. Dodik immediately after the August 23 talks -- and the failure of the Bosniaks to accede to the Serb demands -- declared that the RS would hold its own census. Spiric told Dnevni Avaz that Dodik was pushing for the census "not to throw down the gauntlet to the Federation or Bosnia, but to create conditions for managing economic trends in the RS." He added that without the inclusion of ethnic and religious data, "we would be the only country in Europe where people and horses would be counted the same way." RS President Rajko Kuzmanovic added that the RS needs these census data to avoid "that we know how many cows and tractors we have, but do not know how many members of each ethnic group we have in Bosnia." Two Serb Democratic Party (SDS) representatives in the Bosnian parliament on September 9 sent a proposal on a state-wide census -- including the disputed data -- into parliamentary procedure. The proposal was swiftly defeated in parliament.

16. (SBU) Without a concrete plan, the Serbs have resorted to exchanging verbal fire with the Bosniaks. Serb Tri-Presidency member Nebojsa Radmanovic told the press that "the only politicians who are against a census based on European standards are manipulating unverified figures about the past war because the census would reveal the truth about the lies that have been repeated hundreds of times." Dodik added that with the type of census the Bosniaks are advocating, "it could happen that you go to bed in the evening as a Serb and wake up the next day as a Bosnian. I oppose someone trying to threaten my right to feel like a Serb of the Orthodox religion who speaks the Serbian language."

Comment

17. (C) The idea of a census presents Bosnian leaders an opportunity to achieve a stated requirement for EU progress. However, instead of working toward a compromise to make meeting that EU requirement possible, Bosniaks and Serbs are using the census as an excuse for unconstructive, inflammatory diatribes. The census debate has provided the Serbs one more outlet to proclaim that the RS is a sustainable entity interested in meeting EU standards but that the obdurate Bosniaks are holding them back. Although they have not explicitly stated as much, the Serbs probably also see the census as a way to avoid the legal implications of the Constitutional Court's "constituent peoples decision," which is tied to census data. (Note: This decision, which the court passed in 2000, mandates that the entities ensure proportional representation for all ethnic groups in all levels of government based on the most recent census. End Note.) Instead of framing the debate to the Serbs in terms of meeting a basic requirement for EU accession, the Bosniaks are hurling invective at the Serbs for standing in the way of yet another state-level activity and portraying Serb support for a census as another vehicle for "ethnic cleansing" the RS. The Croats are relatively quiet on this issue for the moment, leaving the battle to the Bosniaks and Serbs. The Partnership Agreement is unlikely to leverage the Bosnians, as the specter of membership is in the distant future and there is no clear pot of money at stake. As a result, the census has become one more issue Bosnian politicians use to enhance their narrow nationalist agendas.

ENGLISH